

Explicit and Implicit Grammar Instructions in Higher Learning Institutions

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Abstract

Two universally accepted approaches to grammar instruction are explicit and implicit teaching of the grammar. Both approaches have their own strengths and limitations. Educators may face a dilemma whether to teach grammar explicitly or implicitly. This paper aims to provide insights into the educators' beliefs towards grammar teaching in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions, and the sources of the held beliefs. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with five educators from several private colleges located in peninsular Malaysia. Data analysis reveals that a majority of the respondents preferred grammar to be taught explicitly in their ESL classrooms; nevertheless they viewed implicit instruction as necessary when conforming to students' needs. The sources of the held beliefs are educators' experience as well as the institutional requirement. This paper draws our attention to the role of educators as an eclectic teaching practitioner who are able to apply a suitable grammar instruction according to learners' needs. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the growth of literature on grammar teaching and learning especially in Malaysian ESL classrooms.

Keywords: educators' beliefs, grammar teaching, explicit grammar, implicit grammar

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Grammar teaching has come to the fore when it enables learners to become competent users of the language with correct usage of structures, forms and within context (Hedge, 2011). Many grammar instructions are introduced to enhance the productive and receptive English skills of learners. However, the current dilemma of teaching and learning grammar is whether to teach it as a stand-alone skill or to be indirectly incorporated with other language skills. It somehow has created a long continuum with two extreme ends where at one end, it places explicit instruction while on another end, it emphasizes implicit instruction of teaching grammar.

For this study, educators' beliefs are important for teaching practice as it affects educators' way of teaching specifically in grammar lesson. According to Niu and Andrew (2012) teacher beliefs are defined as teachers' thoughts about what should be done with teaching. Educators' beliefs are crucial elements in teaching practice. Canh and Barnard (2009) believe that teachers sometimes hold very firm beliefs about various aspects of teaching and the beliefs influence what they do in their classrooms. This study aimed to answer the following questions: 1) What are educators' beliefs towards grammar and the teaching of grammar?; and 2) What are the sources of the held beliefs?

1.2 Literature Review

The on-going debate whether to teach grammar explicitly or implicitly has created the dilemma to educators. Explicit instruction is viewed as technical, memorization, drilling and rule-governed practice in a language classroom. The focus of explicit instruction is to enable the learners to produce grammatically correct speech. Ling (2015) highlights that students need explicit grammar rules in order to formulate their own output correctly. Another characteristic of explicit instruction is that the teacher becomes the main source of information and is at power where learning is conducted within teachers' rules and direction.

On the other hand, implicit instruction is viewed as more flexible and dynamic grammar instruction where learners come to the fore in their learning. Implicit instruction requires learners' involvement, interactive and communicative learning activities, and the focus is on language fluency instead of accuracy. Implicit instruction gives autonomy to the learners where it educates them to be an independent learner. Implicit grammar instruction converts input into intake similar to L1 acquisition (Birsen, 2012). Implicit grammar teaching occurs more naturally in order for students to achieve second language acquisition and grammar competence.

Rizwan and Akhtar (2016) conducted a study at The Educators Elite Campus Johar Town, Lahore. They investigated the impacts of two grammar instructions which are explicit and implicit to teach grammar accuracy specifically on the articles topic. The respondents were 40 10th grade male students selected randomly. They were asked to answer 10 multiple choice questions. Students were given pre-test in order to assess their proficiency level of articles usage. Students were divided into two groups, Group A undergone explicit instruction whilst Group B received implicit instruction for two weeks. In the post-test, Group A scored higher than Group B. Thus, the study suggests that explicit way of instructions is beneficial to develop grammatical accuracy in ESL learners.

Another study conducted by Sopin (2015) investigated teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards grammar instruction in language classroom. A set of questionnaire was administered to the participants and focused on 11 areas concerning grammar teaching. All the respondents agree that grammar teaching is important to be taught in English classroom and they viewed that accuracy is important. A total of 84% of the respondents are in favour of the explicit grammar instruction. On the other hand, 64% of the respondents agree that their students find it difficult to understand grammar structure if to be taught using implicit instruction. Nevertheless, all the respondents agree that grammar should be taught in context that the examples and classroom practice exercises should be contextualized, in a communicative manner, with explicit explanation of the rules. Lastly, 89.5% of the respondents agreed that form-focused corrections help their students to improve grammatical accuracy. This study shows that majority of the respondents favoured explicit instruction to teach grammar in English classroom.

Robinson and Feng (2016) argue that the use of two instructions for teaching grammar will benefit students' writing task. The respondents were two 5th grade teachers and 18 students. The focus of the study was to test the effects of direct grammar instruction in improving the overall quality of students' writing. Self-Regulation Strategy Development (SRSD) was used as learning instruction where the teacher modelled how to use the target strategy and then provided students with as much support as they need as they progressed toward independent use of the strategy. The teachers used different grammar skills based on errors students made in pre-test. After 4 months, the post-test result showed significant gain in students' scores. Four students scored lower on the post-test, five students' scores remained the same and nine of the students' scores increased. The findings from this study show that when teachers read students' writing, identify common errors, and design mini-lessons to aim particular errors, the quality of the students' writing improved.

Soleimani, Jahangiri, and Gohar (2015) conducted a study to investigate the effects of implicit and explicit instructions on implicit knowledge of English past simple tense. The participants were 59 intermediate Persian learners of English who received either explicit or implicit instruction about the grammatical feature in their classrooms. Participants' knowledge of past simple tense acquired in explicit and implicit learning condition was tested through a timed grammaticality judgment task (TGJT) and an elicited oral imitation task (EOIT). Comparison between explicit instruction and implicit instruction on TGJT and EOIT showed significant progress for both groups on the tasks without much difference between them. This study rejected the superiority of explicit instruction over implicit instruction in promoting second language implicit knowledge.

There is no solid evidence whether explicit or implicit instruction works best to teach grammar in ESL classroom. Both instructions received different feedback and results. Thus, this study is conducted to investigate novice educators' beliefs towards grammar teaching and its instruction as well as the sources of their held beliefs in Malaysia tertiary education.

2. Method

2.1 Purposive Sampling

This study used purposive sampling where five educators who teach grammar in ESL classroom were chosen to take part in the study. The educators are currently teaching at private colleges located in Selangor, Malacca and Kelantan. All the five participants have good knowledge and enough experience in teaching grammar and they are able to distinguish both explicit and implicit instructions.

2.2 Research Instrument

Data for this study were generated from semi-structured interviews. The rationale for using semi-structured interview is due to its flexibility that makes it less structured and to allow the participants to express their thoughts or grievances.

2.3 Educators' Demographic Data

Items	Age	Year of teaching experience	Teaching Subjects	Average number of students per class	Students' Level of Proficiency
Educator one (E1)	25	2	English for General Purposes, English for Language Awareness and English for Academic	80	intermediate
Educator two (E2)	26	3	General English, English for Proficiency, English for Academic Communication and English for Professional Communication	20-30	average and weak
Educator three (E3)	27	4	English Communication	15-100	intermediate
Educator four (E4)	25	1	English language Awareness (ELA)	20-100	weak, intermediate and advanced
Educator five (E5)	26	6months	BEL103 and BEL101 for Communicative Purposes and English for Business Purposes respectively	20-80	moderate to advanced

3. Results

3.1 Positive beliefs

3.1.1 Grammar

The interviews reveal that all five educators hold positive beliefs towards grammar. All respondents perceive grammar as “the heart of English language”, “the main part of language system”, “necessary”, “a basic skill”, “an important element in language”, and “it enables learners to convey correct message” for an effective communication to take place. The respondents express that grammar gives a positive impact in learning English as a second language, as shown below:

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	Grammar is important because if people do not understand [us], people will misunderstand [us]” (L63-64)
Educator two (E2)	The basis of all skills, of all other skills, in order to master all four skills of English, [we] would need grammar to do it excellently” (L101-103)
Educator three (E3)	It can help us to speak in a clearer and more effective manner. We can understand how language works” (L105-107). having a good foundation of grammar can help to improve writing and speaking and make us become more confident in communication (L110-115)
Educator four (E4)	Grammar is the heart of English language. In order for [us] to master English language [we] need to know and [we] need to understand how to use grammar rules correctly. So grammar is very important in English (L91-94)

3.1.2 Grammar Teaching

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	Grammar teaching is important but it is something that [we] have to fix over time not just in class only. So [we] cannot hold [our] students and tell them you should produce good grammar just in one semester. [We] cannot do that. So it's very important (L84-89).
Educator two (E2)	We can't say that we should teach grammar first then reading and writing. It's like chicken and egg question? But it is something that is needed complementarily. You develop all these skills together with the grammar skills. Means you don't focus on grammar first and then you go on to other skills but it should be done together (L124-130).
Educator five (E5)	Grammar teaching is the crucial part. It should be the first part that is taught to the students. So they will know how the structure of English should look like (L100-102).

3.1.3 Explicit Instruction

Explicit teaching has been viewed as a direct teaching method, a rule-driven skill, teacher-centered, full of exercises, memorization and rote-learning practice. Four of the educators believe that explicit instruction works well when they teach grammar, as shown below.

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	It works. It works. One word. It works because most of the time I will give them about 60 questions for their homework pertaining to grammar. I will repeat that for like 50 times, okay, drilling. [...] from my point of view, you have to teach them explicitly, you have to teach them through drilling because that's how it works. After two years of teaching, that's how it works (L100-109).
Educator two (E2)	Explicit instruction of grammar is needed to be highlighted specifically. We need to give students exercises, drills for them to master the grammar part in order to master that reading skills (L147-149).
Educator four (E4)	so my belief is that grammar has to be 'drill' and a lot of exercises (L136-137)
Educator five (E5)	Why I like explicit instruction is because I like that's the way I teach the student. Very explicit, very traditional manner in which I go to class and start with the rules of grammar, I will provide them everything; I will provide them from A to Z. So, maybe because of teaching them that kind of way, I feel confident in my own teaching skill when I use explicit instruction of grammar (L135-143).

3.1.5 Implicit Instruction

Implicit instruction is viewed as by the teachers as the indirect grammar teaching, integrated, communicative, and focusing on student-centeredness, as shown below.

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	It works. It works. One word. It works because most of the time I will give them about 60 questions for their homework pertaining to grammar. I will repeat that for like 50 times, okay, drilling. [...] from my point of view, you have to teach them explicitly, you have to teach them through drilling because that's how it works. After two years of teaching, that's how it works (L100-109).
Educator two (E2)	implicit instruction as taking place when the teachers give students the materials,

	such as books and songs and they will acquire grammar structure in sentences when they read the materials (L171-177).
Educator three (E3)	This is where the students learn grammar naturally; they don't really depend on the instructor which is a good way" (L173-174).
Educator four (E4)	Implicit is where I believe you don't tell straight away the topic of the lesson but you somehow for example create another story or you provide a passage to students which contains simple past tense, a lot of simple past tense inside that. And then you ask the students to read, and discover the story and then ask them what are the tenses used in the text. Somehow I believe that is implicit (L207-21).
Educator five (E5)	In my opinion, implicit instruction in grammar is okay for advanced learner. Because if I teach low level of students implicitly, they might not get it correctly because they are not proficient in language (L143-145).

3.2 Less Positive Beliefs

On the other hand, though all educators highlight the importance of grammar in learning English, nevertheless grammar has a terrifying effect on the students that made them become reluctant to speak and lowered their self-confidence towards learning grammar.

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	It's treating students like hell because it makes students lose their self-confidence (E1: L64-66). In her further clarification, she mentions that "grammar is important for the institution only, grammar is important to pass the subject, that's all (L77-78)
Educator five (E5)	I do encourage them to speak I don't focus much on grammar instead because I want to encourage them to speak. Err I see the reason I focus more on fluency because I see they are to speak in English because they are afraid of me correcting them in front of the classroom because of grammar. So I choose not to focus much on grammar when they speak (L64-69).

3.3 The Sources of the Held Beliefs

		E1	E2	E3	E4	E5
Experience	University experience	/	/	/		
	School experience	/	/	/	/	/
	Working Experience	/	/	/	/	/
Institutional Requirement		/	/	/	/	/

3.3.1 Experience

- *University Experience*

Three of the educators believe that their held beliefs either towards explicit or implicit instruction originate from their teacher education program in respective universities.

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	As I remember, grammar subject class, it does not state that student should be taught like this like this or like that. It does not state that. It just say that you can teach implicitly, you can teach explicitly, you can teach inductively, but it's just theoretical yet no experience related (L255-259).

Educator two (E2)	When I was receiving training in my degree time, we were taught that grammar can be taught several ways. I think that is the major origin of my belief (L185-188).
Educator four (E4)	I believe so because during my undergraduate years, we have to go for practicum, teaching at secondary school students. So when I went for my practicum. I didn't know how to inculcate this implicit instruction of grammar. I don't know how to implement; I don't know how to employ that into the classroom to teach the students grammar. All I know is explicit. We have to explain them for example simple present tense and then give example, exercises, exercises, exercise. I don't know how to implement, not to isolated grammar as a stand-alone element in English language. So I always do drilling, drilling (L287-296).
Educator five (E5)	It is originated from my 4-year teacher education program where we have been exposed and been taught about explicit and implicit teaching. How is it working with the students and we were also taught about students' varieties in terms of their proficiency. How do we ensure our efficiency in grammar teaching is by teaching the students according to students' proficiency. (L234-239).

- *School Experience*

One of the most important sources that drives the educators to the held belief is their learning experience from primary and secondary schools. As being explained earlier, explicit instruction focuses on teacher-centeredness in grammar teaching.

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	E1 asserted that her experience learning with a strict teacher during school years has led to explicit instruction belief. "Yes because my teacher used to be very strict because if you cannot answer the question, she will cane you. That's how, when I start to teach. I got back home and I reflect what my teacher did works for us (L215-218).
Educator three (E3)	Furthermore, E3 claims that her learning experience as a student during school and undergraduate years have influence her way of teaching grammar. She mentions that: This is maybe because of the ways how my teacher from primary school, secondary school as well as my undergraduate study. How they have taught me before, so I experienced from there because I believe that way I can really like the way they teach, they give me everything, you know, it's like spoon-feeding.. I know, in a way, it's not good, but I prefer that kind of teaching skill, that's how I am currently doing to my students. I'm not sure whether this is right way or not but I am trying to improve, I'm trying to inserting some implicit teaching in my instruction, in my teaching, yes in teaching grammar (L229-239).
Educator four (E4)	I cannot remember whether it is originated from my school years, during my school years, secondary or primary year but I believe when I was in secondary and primary school, I used to do a lot of exercises. My parents give me a lot of exercises. How to improve English language and then when I did my bachelor degree. We learn about explicit and implicit but somehow or rather my own lecturer, I believe, also use explicit teaching in drilling students. I believe, somehow or rather, it shaped my belief and I think I learn best grammar through drilling, through explicit by doing a lot of exercises (L248-257)
Educator five (E5)	She applied traditional method of teaching grammar. Where she kept on giving us exercises, repeating the same exercises for us to memorize the grammar rules where we already know about that. So we tend to not focusing on that the exercises. We tend to lose interest in her teaching because of the method use which is drilling and rote-learning. So from that I learn a lesson where when I am an educator, I would not want to apply traditional way of teaching grammar which is explicit teaching to students whom already good in grammar. Just don't want to bore them (L250-259).

- *Work Experience*

Three of the respondents disclose that their belief towards explicit grammar instruction is rooted from teaching experience.

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	It starts with the early year of my teaching because when I see whenever I try to teach implicitly, they become lazy. Okay, they think that this teacher is kind, she will not scold us, we can do whatever we want because I try to teach them through music. I try to teach them through role-play. Once they get to enjoy the lesson, so they can enjoy everything that I do afterwards. Since then, I only do that for one semester. After that semester, all I become very strict and very explicit (204-211).
Educator four (E4)	In order for them to get good grades, I used this kind of notes and singular formula how to remember (L338-344)
Educator five (E5)	From my observation when I apply explicit teaching to my low students, they don't respond back to me. They don't respond to grammar teaching. So that's where I get that the students, the low proficiency students, we couldn't apply explicit teaching (L284-288).

Two of the educators prefer to teach grammar explicitly than implicitly due to limited English period per week. Some of them have to teach and complete the syllabus within a short semester where they need to compress 14 weeks lessons to 7 weeks lesson. Therefore, they opt for explicit instruction in teaching grammar because it is time saving.

3.2 Institutional Requirement

Four educators mentioned that the source of their held belief is their institutional requirement. Most of them cited reasons such as “exam-oriented”, “good grades”, “great results”, “passing examination” that make them opt for drilling, rote-memorization, exercises in making sure their students able to use grammar items accurately and correctly. Though the educators realized that this is not an ideal situation for them to deal with, it becomes a drive to opt for explicit instruction which is full of grammar drilling and exercises.

Responses	
Educator one (E1)	Yes because I have seniors and bosses even first day of teaching my boss taught me that this students need to be taught explicitly, through drilling (L272-274)
Educator three (E3)	In another point of view, though she mentions that her workplace requires the students to get good grades, E2 believes that grammar is important to be taught to enable students to perform other language skills. This can be clearly seen in her statement: I think not directly, just that the place I'm working at emphasize students to get good grades in examination. That's why, when I teach the students good grammar it could help you in writing and when you are speaking. So, that's why I think, [...] I did, I taught grammar explicitly in order for them to be able to do the other four skills of grammar (L195-200).
Educator four (E4)	Yes, because I'm teaching at one private college. It's one of the private institutions so they really focus on the students' achievement. To see the students' achievement, improving or not. Basically, all of their assessments, weekly assessment, like their quizzes and tests, it's merely about grammar. So your question whether is my institution influence my belief, yes because I need that particular subject. I need drilling, explicit in order for them to see students' progress (L306-319).
Educator five (E5)	Yes, the requirement of the institution, in terms of weightage the percentage in the assessment. It touches on accuracy in target language. So grammar should be taught explicitly in the classroom (L263-266).

Educators' experience especially school and work experiences become the sources of their held beliefs. In addition their institutional requirement also contributes to the held belief.

4. Discussion

4.1 *Educators' Beliefs*

Findings have shown that all educators believe grammar as an important element in ESL learning. Grammar is necessary to be taught, a system that helps language to work, a heart of language and a crucial element in language learning. In this study, most of the respondents prefer to teach grammar explicitly. They express reasons such as "grammar should be taught directly with drillings and rote-memorization practices", "explicit instruction saves more time", "grammar is not acquired through natural learning but it should be taught in isolation".

Furthermore, they assert that explicit teaching can help students to become an accurate English user that enable them to use grammar correctly inside and outside classroom. This is in line with Stathis and Gotsch (2008) and Rashid, Vethamani, and Rahman (2010) who claim that ESL teachers believe that English learners should receive direct instruction in the rules of grammar and writing conventions. Coherently, Birsen (2012) states that in many parts of the world; pre-service and in-service training of English Language teachers and the course books on the market have encouraged teachers to change their grammar teaching from traditional grammar rule teaching to a more communicative and interactive ways which focus on how to make use of grammar rather than a pure knowledge of grammar. However in practice, teachers keep their beliefs on the benefits of explicit grammar teaching as opposed to implicitness. This shows that though grammar teaching has been introduced to be taught implicitly, educators believe explicit teaching as more beneficial in ESL classrooms.

However, though most of the educators believe that explicit instruction is effective in their classrooms, they are not against the implementation of implicit instruction to teach grammar. They view teaching grammar implicitly is necessary when it can benefit students' learning. Burgess and Etherington (2002) mention that "indeed, there does not appear to be a bias towards explicit teaching of grammar for these teachers, but instead they seem to favour more implicit teaching". According to Rodriguez (2009) experienced language teachers have long recognized the benefits of the judicious use of error correction, repetition, and even drills in the classroom. Similarly, though most of the respondents in this study are still new in teaching practice, overall findings show that though the educators disclose the importance of implicit instruction yet they prefer grammar to be taught explicitly in their English classrooms. This is mainly influenced by their prior experience and institutional requirement as discussed earlier.

4.2 *Sources of the Held Beliefs*

There are two main sources of the held beliefs discussed which are experience and institutional requirement. The experience is categorized into three which are: 1) school experience, 2) university experience and 3) work experience. The respondents mention that their university experience especially teacher education program has led them to the held belief. Indeed, teacher education program plays an important role in influencing educators to teach specifically in grammar teaching. The educators view that their teacher education program has trained them to teach grammar both explicitly and implicitly and importantly to put students' needs to the fore. This shows that teacher education program is a positive drive for the educators in order to implement the held belief.

Birsen (2012) and Mihat (2016) claim that changes in classroom applications will not occur overnight. It is hard for educators when it comes to the real practice to implement integrated grammar approach due to several challenges, such as time constraint and students' level of proficiency. Nishimuro and Borg (2013) claim that teacher cognition is formed by thoughts, knowledge and beliefs and has an impact on instructional decisions. Professional knowledge is primarily gained at teacher training institutions and this knowledge affects the thoughts (Rashid, Rahman, & Rahman, 2016; Rashid, Rahman, & Yunus, 2017). The practice, on the other hand, displays the beliefs. Thus, the program has served the educators with basic knowledge and theoretical foundation that enable and help educators to apply in teaching practice.

Most of the educators disclose that grammar teaching benefit students if it is taught explicitly nevertheless if implicit instruction benefits their students in certain situation, they do not resist doing so. This is coherent with Burgess and Etherington (2002) who mention that "however, reference to student characteristics, needs and wishes in several answers indicate that teachers' classroom actions are not determined by theoretical beliefs alone, but that student reaction to different approaches is taken into account" (p.31). This shows that educators' beliefs and its manifestation in a classroom practice considers students' needs in order to help them have a better teaching and learning grammar climate.

The educators claim that the institutional requirement lead them to teach grammar explicitly in order for students to get good result and pass the course. This is coherent with Hastings and Murphy (2004) who explain that this introduces a performance requirement that is defined in terms of a particular test. It also implies a content requirement for teaching: all aspects of grammar that students are expected to know must be taught. In other words, a specific syllabus of grammar points is imposed. However, the teaching does not need to go beyond that syllabus: the grammar covered should be correct, but does not have to be technically rigorous, comprehensive, or useful for any purpose other than the test. Though it is viewed as not an ideal situation of learning, the findings indicate that it becomes the major source of educators implementing explicit teaching in their ESL classrooms.

The sources of the held beliefs may vary from one educator to another. Furthermore sources may root from internal or external teaching conditions that educators have to deal in grammar teaching.

5. Recommendations and Conclusion

- Educators

Educators are recommended to identify their held beliefs towards teaching practice especially to grammar approach. Furthermore, educators can do self-monitoring, self-checklist by using questionnaires that have listed the characteristics or the concepts of each grammar approach so that it enables the educators to identify and recognize their preferences or beliefs towards each grammar approach that can be used in the classroom.

- Institutions of Higher Learning

It is recommended to have a special course for English educators specifically in grammar teaching. The training course can prepare specific grammar modules to be used by the educators. The modules can be prepared according to institutional requirements.

- Future Research

It is recommended that future research selects participants that come from various background of education, such as primary, secondary, public universities or other institutions so that rich insights can be obtained. Future research can also include classroom observation that enables the researcher to see the real classroom practices that maybe reflected from their held beliefs.

In conclusion, the findings have shown that the educators prefer to use explicit instruction to teach grammar in their ESL tertiary classrooms. However, they view implicit instruction as important to be applied if it can contribute to the development of teaching and learning grammar. Both instructions have their strengths and weaknesses that educators have to be aware of when implementing each instruction in grammar teaching. Moreover, experience and institutional requirement become the main sources of educators' held beliefs. The participants believe that teacher education program, their school and work experiences, and institutional requirements give impact on their current beliefs of grammar teaching. Educators need to be a flexible teaching practitioner in order to suit students' needs and fulfil the institutional requirements.

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